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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether females use more supportive behaviors than males and whether males demonstrate more delayed responses than females in observable listening behavior. It was hypothesized that females would use higher levels of gaze and a greater frequency of head nods and supportive back-channels (SBCs) than males, and that males would use higher levels of delayed minimal response than females. Subjects, 18 previously unacquainted cross-sex dyads from a lower level college communication class, were put together in a hospitality room and asked to talk and get acquainted. Subjects were informed that their conversation would be audio- and videotaped. Findings based on an analysis of these tapes indicated that the women used more supportive nonverbal behaviors than the men and that the men demonstrated supportive behavior in a similar manner but to a lesser degree. Results also showed that the males were prompt in responding, a finding which differed from the hypothesis as well as from previous studies that found a delayed male reaction. Previous research was supported, however, by the findings that (1) males spoke more than females and (2) females interrupted more frequently than males, usually to express agreement or request elaboration or clarification. Overall, the partners' behaviors were found to be a mirror image. Results suggest that both males and females can modify their behavior in conversation to produce a more balanced, mutually supportive interaction. (These findings are interpreted using a relational perspective. Two pages of references are included.) (JD)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL LISTENING BEHAVIORS

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL LISTENING BEHAVIORS

Although listening has always been a crucial element and biological sex an influential variable in every aspect of the communication process, only in recent decades have researchers given intense effort to their study. Business leaders, management trainers, researchers and teachers at all levels of the educational system have focused on listening in an effort to understand the phenomenon of receiving impressions and to develop effective listening training programs. As the roles played by women and men have changed, leaders and participants in virtually every way of life have realized a need for a better understanding of how men and women differ in their communication behavior.

The research results on sex differences in verbal behavior in conversation, particularly the recent literature on relative amount of speaking time and frequency of interruptions, present contradictory results. (Hirschman, 1973; Markel, Long & Saine, 1976; Martin & Craig, 1983.) Reports of observable nonverbal behaviors in conversation, though not conclusive, suggest strongly that women and men exhibit different nonverbal behaviors in conversation particularly in the role of listener. A large volume of advice on how to become a better listener is available in both academic and popular literature. The advice falls into two categories: internal cognitive processes and external verbal

and nonverbal behavior observable by others. The focus of this paper is on the observable nonverbal listening behaviors in dyadic conversation which, based on expert opinion and empirical findings, contribute to effective listening.

The Advice on Effective Listening

Writers of text material for college classes and management training sessions frequently recommended verbal feedback including asking questions and paraphrasing (See, for example, Applebaum & Anatol, 1982; Phillips & Wood, 1983; and, Steil, Barker & Watson, 1983.) The suggestions on nonverbal communication for listeners probably include looking at the speaker more often than any other single behavior. (See, for example, Applebaum & Anatol, 1982; Chapman, 1983; Gamble & Gamble, 1982; and, Zima, 1983.) Listeners can also use nodding and providing supportive back-channels to convey their support to the partner. The advice of these writers is based both on their experience and on research results. Combinations of nonverbal cues, including gaze, nods, and audible back-channels convey the listener's responsiveness (Reece & Whitman, 1962) and may indicate agreement (Birdwhistle, 1970; Schegloff, 1972). Haase and Tepper (1972), in a study of counselor behaviors, verified the importance of the nonverbal component of a listener's behavior in eliciting high ratings of empathy or supportiveness.

Sex Differences in Listening Behavior

The literature suggests that the listening behaviors of women and men vary in cross-sex conversation. Gazing, smiling,

nodding and giving brief, well-timed audible responses to the speaker are behaviors which a listener can use to support the speaker's self-expression. In at least one sample, women have been found to gaze and smile significantly more in cross-sex dyads (Duncan and Fiske, 1977). Both Duncan and Fiske (1977) and Putnam and McCalister (1980) found a higher, though non-significant, frequency of head nods while listening for females. With some exceptions (See, e.g., Martin & Craig, 1983), the research results show females providing male conversational partners with significantly more supportive back-channels than they receive (Crosby, Jose & Wong-McCarthy, 1981; Dittman, 1972; Hirschman, 1973; Putnam & McCallister, 1980.) Zimmerman and West (1975) and Fishman (1978) report that males not only fail to provide the partner with audible back-channels, but frequently use delayed minimal response. These responses which are delayed for several seconds after the speaker finishes have, in the view of these researchers, the effect of discouraging rather than encouraging the speaker. Thus, women use high levels of supportive nonverbal behaviors including smiling, gazing, nodding and supportive back-channels. Men use the same behaviors with lower frequency and, according to the last two studies discussed, the use of delayed minimal response is overwhelmingly a male phenomenon.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

We undertook this analysis to determine whether, in a student sample, females used more supportive nonverbal behaviors

and males more delayed responses as the literature suggests. We were particularly interested in whether a pattern of support or non-support could be detected by observable nonverbal behavior. Based on the available literature, we made the following predictions of subjects' behavior while listening:

H_1 Females will use higher levels of gaze.

H_2 Females will use greater frequency of head nods.

H_3 Females will use greater frequency of SBC's.

H_4 Males will use higher levels of delayed minimal response.

METHOD

Sample

The subjects were volunteers from 100- and 200-level communication classes at a small New England university. Their mean age was 21.4 years. They formed eighteen previously unacquainted cross-sex dyads.

Procedures

The subjects were met, assisted with paper work and escorted to the studio for taping by a research assistant. The studio was set up with chairs and a small table with coffee and doughnuts. The Researcher greeted them and asked them to talk and get acquainted and invited them to enjoy the refreshments. The researcher had informed them when they volunteered that their conversation would be audio and videotaped. Taping was done through a one-way mirror. This analysis is based on the first ten minutes of the audio and video tapes.

The Variables

Researchers have operationally defined supportive back-channels, sometimes called listener responses, in slightly different ways. The most consistently used criteria is that these audible responses do not take over the speaking floor. In this study, responses of one syllable, e.g., "m-mm," "oh," and verbal reinforcers of one to three words, e.g., "Yes," "I know," "That's the truth," which either showed agreement with the speaker or indicated non-comittal were coded as Supportive Back-Channels (SBC). Such responses are most often inserted at a barely perceptible pause or overlap briefly with the speaker. Two trained coders counted the SBC's using the audio tapes.

Delayed minimal responses are utterances similar to SBC's but occur several seconds after the partner has finished speaking. After careful viewing of the tapes indicated that delayed responses were not a feature of these subjects' speech, this variable was dropped from the analysis. Smiling was excluded for the same reason. The subjects, for the most part, had pleasant facial expressions, but too few smiles were observed for meaningful analysis.

Head nods were defined as each instance of nodding, i.e., if a subject nodded two or three times in rapid succession, the coders scored one nod.

Gaze was defined as subject's head orientation toward the partner. The available video equipment was not sufficient to focus in each person separately and study their eye behavior

closely. Gaze was timed by two coders using electronic stop-watches.

Data Analysis

Reliabilities between two coders on each of the three variables exceeded .85. Mean differences between females and males on frequency of nods and SBC's and minutes gazing while listening were compared by two-tailed t-tests. Cohen's (1977) formula for post-hoc computation of statistical power at alpha = .01 was used to assess power for each of the three t-tests.

RESULTS

The females used significantly more gaze, nods and SBC's while their partners were speaking. (See Table 1) All three variables differed sufficiently to produce a probability estimate considerably lower than the traditional cut-off alpha of .05 and a degree of power exceeding .80. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are accepted.

TABLE 1

	t	p	Female Mean	SD	Male Mean	SD	Power
Gaze	3.64	.001	3.896	1.388	2.581	1.007	.83
Nods	3.64	.013	11.556	6.611	6.722	4.250	.83
SBC	3.64	.001	19.833	9.817	9.944	9.817	.90

(For all tests, df=34)

DISCUSSION

The young women in this study fulfilled the prediction from the literature that they would use more supportive nonverbal

behaviors than the males. The males were supportive in a similar manner but to a lesser degree.

The males in the present study, unlike those in the Zimmerman & West (1975) and Fishman (1978) studies, were prompt in responding to the partner's remarks. Two explanations for this difference in male response pattern, one related to time of data collection and one to context, appear reasonable.

Collection of data for the present study occurred approximately a decade later than the 1970's studies. The time difference may explain the difference in results. Males and females have become more aware of sex differences in communication behavior and how these differences are perceived by the opposite sex.

Both the earlier studies were carred out in naturalistic settings. Zimmerman & West taped conversations of students in a coffee-shop; Fishman taped marriage partners at home in everyday interactions such as reading and preparing dinner. In these settings, conversants may not have felt compelled to keep the flow of talk constant. Especially in the case of Fishman's couples, talk was an optional behavior to be engaged in while doing other tasks. Gilligan (1982) described women's view of the world as involving relational webs among people and men's view as more concerned with individuation. Stemming from these orientations, women make frequent use conversation to maintain connection and men more often use conversation for task-accomplishment. Consequently, when conversation is optional

as in the naturalistic studies, men make less effort to maintain the flow. The dyads in the present study had volunteered to participate in conversation in a laboratory setting and were instructed to "talk and get acquainted." Thus, talk was both the task assignment as well as the medium of relating, and we have no reason to expect that either male or female will delay a response to the partner's remarks.

Although the females showed higher levels on the supportive nonverbal variables of interest, the males used the same behaviors to a lesser degree. As reported elsewhere (Sayers, 1986), the males in this sample spoke more; the females had a higher frequency of interruptions and asked more questions seeking information about the partner. With the exception of the females' frequent interruptions, the two partners' behaviors are in mirror image. A relational view of interaction is required to explain this behavior.

Watzlawick, Bavelas and Jackson (1967) set forth the basis for relational theory, in part, by explaining the interdependence of interactants' behaviors. Neither partner's behavior can be said to cause the other's, but each elicits the other. Their classic example of nagging and withdrawing suggests an explanation for these subjects' nonverbal and verbal behavior. They reason that whether the nagging elicits the withdrawal or withdrawal elicits the nagging depends on how the interaction sequences are punctuated. The punctuation indicates which behavior occurred first and, thus, can be said to have elicited

the other. When two alternating behaviors continue, the pattern appears circular rather than linear. Which occurred first becomes unimportant. The circular pattern here is composed of supportive reinforcing behavior by the females and longer speeches by the males. The more the females reinforced their speech, the more the males spoke; conversely, the more the males spoke, the higher the level of reinforcing behaviors the females produced.

The confusing variable in this circular pattern is the frequency of the females' interruptions. In a brief post-hoc analysis (Sayers, 1986) of six of the eighteen dyads, more than half the interruptions of both females and males were found to be agreement, elaboration, or request for clarification. The interruptions may have been another method of reinforcing the partner and thus be part of the circular pattern. Another possible explanation is that the women interrupted frequently in an effort to break the pattern of long speeches by the men. Further analysis, particularly of the verbal content of these conversations, is required to resolve this issue.

We are aware of the possibility of pretending to listen by using the nonverbal variables studied here, particularly gazing. However, nonverbal supportive behavior will not be effective unless used appropriately. SBC's interspersed in the partner's speech at random will only deceive a partner who is also not paying attention. Dittman (1972) pointed out that SBC's are well timed; these supportive vocalisations most often occur

at barely perceptible pauses in the speaker's utterance, as if to say, "Go on, I'm listening." Although empirical evidence is not available on the timing of nods in conversation, experience suggests that this supportive behavior must also be timely to be effective. In addition to providing support at appropriate points in time, the listener who shows support nonverbally should, during the turn as speaker, produce utterances which follow the partner's speech naturally. If a listener's supportive behaviors appear frequently at locations other than natural pauses in the speaker's utterance, and a natural progression of content is not evident, then it would be reasonable to expect that supportive behaviors are being produced mechanically and insincerely. In the conversations studied here, the supportive behaviors appear to occur at appropriate locations; detailed analysis is necessary to verify the matching of listener with speaker behaviors.

The implication of these results for training in nonverbal listening behaviors is that we need to cultivate the listener's awareness of the supportive behaviors available to the interactant. Males can cultivate a higher level of supportiveness; females can consider the consequences of their intensive use of reinforcing behaviors. (See Leathers, 1986, for more detailed suggestions for behavioral changes for men and women.)

In summary, the interlocking pattern of females' high level of nonverbal supportive behaviors and the males' greater

verbosity in this sample of young college students was interpreted using a relational perspective. We have suggested that both males and females can modify their behavior in conversation to produce a more balanced, mutually supportive interaction.

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